

Rengma Dialects¹

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A single exonym, ‘Rengma’, officially recognises two distinct groups: the Nzang/Nzon or Rengma proper, and the Nthenyi or Northern Rengma. They speak different languages. Mills (1937:285) identified the language of the former as Rengma A and called the language of the latter Rengma B. The Rengma Kuchuris, who live in the Phek district of Nagaland, are among the few Naga groups that make up the Pochury tribe today. Mills (ibid: 288ff) also provided the only available data on the language spoken in Meluri (by the Rengma Kuchuri), calling it Rengma C and claiming that Rengma B (Nthenyi) and C (Meluri) are ‘far more like each other than either is like [Rengma] A’. Marrison’s *Classification of Naga Languages* (1967) systematically analyses Mills’ data on Meluri. In this paper, the term ‘Rengma’ refers specifically to Rengma proper (Mills’ Rengma A); its native speakers speak two regional dialects: one in Karbi Anglong, Assam, and the other in Tseminyu, Nagaland. Nthenyi or Northern Rengma is also spoken in the Tseminyu district, to the north of places where the people speak one of two dialects of Rengma proper. In Assam, the Rengmas refer to their first language as *Nzang khwen*, while their relatives in Nagaland call their native language *Nzon khwen*.

A list of 32 words below shows that the percentage of cognates between Nzang/Nzon khwen and Nthenyi is low, except for items that derive from the same etyma reconstructable at a mesolanguage level.

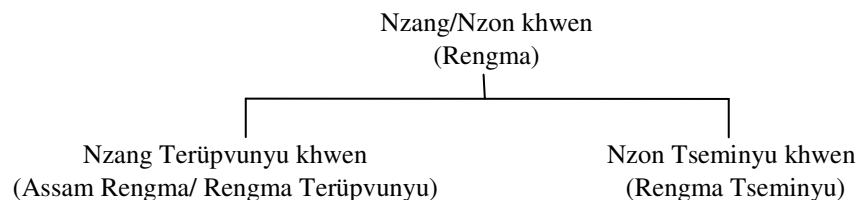
	Nzang khwen/ Nzon khwen		Nthenyi		Meluri
	Terüpvunyu (Author’s data)	Tseminyu (Author’s data)	(Semy 2016)	(Mills 1937)	(Mills 1937)
‘bone’	<i>arü</i>	<i>nrü</i>	<i>aghü</i>	<i>mawü</i>	<i>arrü</i>
‘chicken’	<i>terü</i>	<i>tero</i>	<i>avüghüü</i>	<i>awuu</i>	<i>awi</i>
‘cloth’	<i>pheh</i>	<i>phi</i>	<i>athsü</i>	<i>atsü</i>	<i>atsü</i>
‘dog’	<i>tehih</i>	<i>tehi</i>	<i>affü</i>	<i>aphu</i>	<i>ashu</i>
‘eye’	<i>hetü</i>	<i>yhütü</i>	<i>anyon</i>	<i>anyang</i>	<i>anotha</i>
‘fire’	<i>mah</i>	<i>mah</i>	<i>anye</i>	<i>anyi</i>	<i>ami</i>
‘fish’	<i>tsehü</i>	<i>tsehü, tseühü*</i>	<i>ngaqhu</i>	<i>anga</i>	<i>anga</i>
‘hair’	<i>hüh</i>	<i>hü</i>	<i>asen</i>	<i>ayiasung</i>	<i>ashe</i>
‘horn’	<i>atseh</i>	<i>-tse</i>	<i>aghacü</i>	–	–
‘house’	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ajen</i>	<i>azung</i>	<i>aze</i>
‘louse’	<i>terheh</i>	<i>terhü</i>	<i>axhi</i>	–	–
‘meat’	<i>thüh</i>	<i>thyü</i>	<i>asa</i>	<i>asa</i>	<i>asa</i>
‘name’	<i>jen</i>	<i>zeng</i>	<i>nyang</i>	–	–
‘pig’	<i>tebo</i>	<i>tebo</i>	<i>avü</i>	<i>avu</i>	<i>avu</i>
‘stone’	<i>cho</i>	<i>tso</i>	<i>alon</i>	<i>alung</i>	<i>alung</i>
‘sun’	<i>heka</i>	<i>yhüko</i>	<i>ghani</i>	<i>ani</i>	<i>areni</i>
‘tail’	<i>ama</i>	<i>ama</i>	<i>aghaanoo</i>	–	–
‘tiger’	<i>temen</i>	<i>teme</i>	<i>ademi</i>	<i>ametiwa</i>	<i>amiwa</i>
‘tongue’	<i>nyi</i>	<i>nyi</i>	<i>amielie</i>	<i>ameli</i>	<i>amezi</i>
‘tooth’	<i>hü</i>	<i>h(y)ü</i>	<i>ayha</i>	<i>aha</i>	<i>aha</i>
‘tribe’	<i>chepwen</i>	<i>tsipwen</i>	<i>amizza</i>	–	–
‘water’	<i>di</i>	<i>zü</i>	<i>adsü</i>	<i>atsü</i>	<i>achu</i>
‘and’	<i>do</i>	<i>lo</i>	<i>nuo</i>	–	–
‘but’	<i>aye</i>	<i>ayi</i>	<i>isalaa</i>	<i>isanu, isato</i>	<i>antu</i>
‘one’	<i>keme</i>	<i>nme</i>	<i>kisü</i>	<i>kesü</i>	<i>ke, kesü</i>
‘two’	<i>kenyhu</i>	<i>kenyhun</i>	<i>keni</i>	<i>keni</i>	<i>keni</i>
‘come’	<i>rü</i>	<i>ryü</i>	<i>gho, gha</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ru</i>
‘cry; weep’	<i>chi</i>	<i>chü</i>	<i>qai</i>	–	–
‘die’	<i>she</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>shüü</i>	<i>shü</i>	<i>si</i>
‘eat’	<i>tü</i>	<i>tyü</i>	<i>tsa</i>	<i>tsa</i>	<i>tsa</i>
‘go’	<i>gü</i>	<i>gyü</i>	<i>waa</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>wa</i>
plain negative	<i>-mu</i>	<i>-mvü</i>	<i>nme-</i>	<i>me-, ma-/mo-</i>	<i>me-, ma-/mo-</i>

* Two slightly different spellings, *tsehü* and *tseühü*, are used, but there is no difference in pronunciation, /tsə.hə/.

¹ The reader can find the following excerpt in section 3 of the paper titled ‘A Phonological description of Nzang Terüpvunyu khwen (Assam Rengma)’ available on academia.edu and archives.org.

If one were to exclude the lexical equivalents of ‘bone’, ‘fire’, ‘meat’, ‘pig’, ‘stone’, ‘tongue’, ‘tooth’, ‘two’, ‘die’, and ‘eat’, it would become apparent that the Meluri and Nythenyi words are different from those used in Nzang/Nzon khwen. While the same particle is used in the plain negative, it is used differently in Nythenyi (Rengma B) and Nzang/Nzon khwen (Rengma A). In Nythenyi, it is used as a prefix, while in Nzang/Nzon khwen, it is used as a suffix or postposition (*see* Mills *ibid*: 301); these differences in usage are noteworthy.

In the table above, we have equivalent words in two languages. Although their native speakers use endonyms, we could avoid the same in favour of ‘Rengma’ and ‘Northern Rengma’. This choice may need clarification, though, at least for those unaware that Rengma and Northern Rengma are linguistically distinct. Nevertheless, since this paper will not compare the two languages, we will not need to mention their differences whenever we mention Rengma. Here we shall use the term ‘Rengma’ to only avoid repeating the word Nzang/Nzon khwen over and over. It is worth mentioning that this language has two dialects.



The two dialects differ mainly in phonology. Speakers of one dialect can understand those of the other to a considerable extent. A few substituted words exist in the lexicon; each dialect has borrowed from other languages in contact over the past two hundred years.